

WASHINGTON, DC (October 22, 2009) -- On July 28, 2005 at Camp Hope, Baghdad, Iraq, Jamie Leigh Jones, an employee of Halliburton/Kellogg Brown & Root, was gang-raped by seven men and locked in a shipping crate. Ever since, justice has been denied.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-IL, has joined Ms. Jones' fight for justice and is working to make sure her tragic story is not repeated and see that her courage is met with action. In a letter she penned to Reps. John Murtha, D-PA, and Bill Young, R-FL, and signed by 34 Members of Congress, Rep. Schakowsky urged her colleagues to support legislation by Sen. Al Franken, D-MN, that would deny federal dollars to contractors that force secret binding arbitration on their employees in cases of sexual violence, sexual harassment, sex discrimination, and other unlawful workplace discrimination

Text of letter below:

*Dear Chairman Murtha and Ranking Member Young:*

*We are writing to respectfully request that the House conferees to H.R. 3326, the FY2010 Defense Appropriations Act, recede to the Senate bill with respect to the Franken amendment. The Franken amendment would protect the rights of contract employees to file sexual assault, sexual harassment and workplace discrimination suits and should be preserved in its entirety.*

*We are all aware of the horrific case of Jamie Leigh Jones, who was viciously assaulted, gang-raped, and sexually harassed by her co-workers while working for Halliburton/Kellogg Brown & Root in Iraq. After the attack, Halliburton isolated Ms. Jones in a shipping container with an armed guard out front. Ms. Jones only was able to contact her family after convincing her guard to lend her his cell phone.*

*Upon her rescue from Iraq and her return to the States, Ms. Jones filed a lawsuit against Halliburton for the harm she endured. Halliburton insisted that Ms. Jones submit her claims to forced arbitration, a private system that caters to the repeat business of corporations, instead of to a neutral judge and a jury of her peers.*

*After over four years of litigation, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals recently ruled that Ms. Jones' sexual-assault claims could proceed to court. But her claims of discriminatory treatment and sexual harassment will still be forced into arbitration. In the meantime, Halliburton has filed an appeal to force all of Ms. Jones claims to arbitration and again deny her any hearing in court.*

*Ms. Jones is not alone. Countless women like her are being forced into this secret, biased system of arbitration when they are subjected to unlawful abuse, harassment, and discrimination. In fact, since Ms. Jones went public with her story, at least 38 women who worked as contractors in Iraq, Kuwait, and other countries have contacted her to discuss their own experiences with sexual abuse in Iraq. As Ms. Jones recognized herself,*

*Unfortunately, my case is not an isolated incident. If arbitration of these claims is forced, then there will be justice for none of the victims of these military contractors' misdeeds. With the misuse of arbitration, we have made corporate entities in this country above the law.*

*An amendment to the 2010 Defense Appropriations Act that was adopted by the Senate addresses exactly this problem. Offered by Senator Franken, this amendment would deny federal dollars to contractors that force secret binding arbitration on their employees in cases of sexual violence, sexual harassment, and sex and other unlawful job discrimination under Title VII. It would ensure that women like Ms. Jones have the opportunity to seek justice against their perpetrators and to hold the corporate actors who allow sexual abuse accountable in a court of law.*

*The Franken Amendment passed the Senate on October 6, 2009, by a bipartisan vote of 68-30. Supporters of the amendment know that the federal government has no business doing business with companies that deny their employees the most fundamental legal protection: the right to equal justice under the law. And they know that the protections against sexual violence and discrimination that we all support are meaningless if they cannot be enforced in a court of law.*

*We agree. That's why we strongly support the retention of the Franken Amendment in this year's Defense Appropriations Act. Employees of federal contractors – contractors paid with taxpayer dollars – should not be denied access to one the fundamental principles of American democracy – the jury system -- when they are the victims of wrong-doing.*

*For these reasons, we urge the House conferees to accept the Franken amendment in order to protect the rights of employees of federal contractors with regards to sexual assault, sexual harassment and workplace discrimination matters.*

